

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 14, 2017 - "Hope and Hospitality"

Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 14, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Hope and Hospitality

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

This passage is often read at funerals, for good reason. In the face of death, it brings such comfort to hear that Jesus prepares a place for us to dwell with God forever.

Since it's part of so many funerals, we sometimes think this passage is only about what will happen after we die.

Yet, here Jesus isn't really talking about what happens after death. He isn't talking about heaven and saying some will get in and some won't, though it's often interpreted that way.

These words are part of Jesus' final teaching to his disciples about their life with God here on earth. The disciples have been experiencing the presence of God with them in Jesus, even if they can't fully articulate that. Now they hear that Jesus will be leaving them and they're feeling anxious.

Jesus gives them instructions about how to carry on his work. He also assures them that he is preparing a place for them in the presence of God, now - in their lives that will continue on earth.

That means that the promises Jesus makes here are for the living - for those first disciples and for us - in our lives now.

A reflection by Pr. Steve Garnaas-Holmes beautifully captures this. He writes:

Jesus is not talking about being dead and entering into the afterlife.

He's talking about entering into this life, being really alive.

God's house is not death. It's God's presence.

It's this life. This moment.

The Beloved goes before you into this moment,

is here in this moment before you are,

and makes room for you,

opens a space, blesses your belonging.

The Gracious One comes to you:

leaves the place of divine certainty and perfection

and meets you where you are, in your uncertainty,

your limitation, your partiality,

and takes you to himself,

gathers you into his heart,
so that where he is,
not where he's going to be after he dies, or you do,
but where he *is*—right here, right now,
in the intimate presence of God—
you may be.

What if you were to enter your life?
It's ready for you.
What if, in gratitude and humility,
you were to live it welcoming others
into the many rooms
of God?

Jesus makes room for us, opens space for us in the very presence of God.

The presence of God is everywhere in all of creation, but our sin blinds us to this and prevents us from entering God's presence. We get fixated on ourselves - our wants, our inadequacies, our accomplishments, our failures, our progress. We compare ourselves to others, we worry there isn't enough, we strive, grasp, and cling to the gifts of God. We live as if experiencing peace and well-being is about what we do and don't do, as if we must search and find God.

That is not the way into the presence of God.
All of that is not the truth about ourselves or about God.
It is not the life God intends for us.

When we live that way we totally miss the presence of God in every moment, in all of creation.

Jesus opens up space for us, for you. Jesus says you are beloved, you are forgiven, you are accepted just as you are. Let go of your striving and searching and wanting and achieving. Let go of thinking everything depends upon you and your activity. Jesus says - I go before you, I take you myself so that where I am, in God's presence, you may be also.

This welcome Jesus gives us lets us experience God's presence. It also opens space within us - space that lets us receive others, be present to them, and freely share of ourselves. It allows us to carry out Jesus' work of drawing people into God - work he calls us to do and promises we can do.

This passage does provide hope in the face of death, but it has much more to do with hospitality than with heaven. It's about the hospitality that Jesus shows us as he makes room for us and opens space for us in the presence of God. It's about the hospitality we're called to offer others.

We often think about hospitality in relation to hosting a family gathering, having friends over for supper, making the house or the fellowship hall look nice for guests. Those are important ways we practice hospitality; but at the core, hospitality is about making space for others.

The Congregation Council has identified deep hospitality, making space for others, as a priority for this congregation this year. I see this being lived out in so many ways. Members notice guests and offer welcome into the building and into fellowship hour. People introduce themselves to those they don't know and move around to different tables at fellowship hours to get to know others. So many people and groups prepared the space and a wonderful welcome for new members last Sunday. These new members

have already been invited to freely share their gifts and hopefully also know that there's freedom to say no. That freedom to say no was affirmed by last year's nominating committee as they invited people to consider serving on other committees. Deep hospitality involves tending a space where it is safe to say no to invitations and no to good things that aren't right for an individual or the community at this time.

Hospitality is also happening through a new idea offered last year by a member of the Education Committee. The committee was working on a Lenten project collecting funds for Syria and she suggested they use a cookbook called "Soup for Syria". It seemed like a bit of a tangent from the Lenten project, but the committee made space for her 'out of the box' idea. They said yes and let's tie the soup into raising awareness for the project. This started a new tradition of the kids making soup for the congregation during Lenten soup suppers. That in turn has given the congregation the chance to welcome the energy and chaos of the kids and to broaden the ministry of hospitality that members offer to one another in the kitchen. It has also inspired the Council to identify saying "yes and" to each other as much as possible as another priority.

Together we practice living out the hospitality Jesus has first shown us. Together we practice making space for others as Jesus has opened space for us in the very presence of God. Together, in gratitude and humility, we enter and welcome others into the many rooms of God.

Let's take a moment now to simply be in the presence of God, the presence that opens us up to others.